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The Old Pond
by
Takeshi Takamoto

Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MFA Imaging Arts/ Computer Animation
SCHOOL OF FILM AND ANIMATION
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
June, 2003

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Permission From Author Required

Title of thesis

The Old Pond

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How the film “The Old Pond” got made

Animation is a form of art and visual language we see in our daily lives. People choose this form for certain reasons. For instance, it may be because the story could fit into the style, or it is just what they want to do, although there might be some criticism of why it has to be made in animation.

Naturally ideas about animation can be different in every country and Disney animation is not the only style to be followed. So-called “Japanimation” (means Japanese animation) has been booming all over the world. In spite of the low quality of animation (not the storytelling), a limited animation style has been accepted and become popular in many countries, especially in Asia for over the past three decades.

As a Japan-born Korean myself, I have been greatly influenced from Japanese animations all my life. Based on that background, I would like to discuss about the decisions and the choices I made for my thesis film “The Old Pond.”

The Beginning

No matter how realistic the story is, animation is fantasy. At first I thought the story of “The Old Pond” would best be done in live-action, instead of animation. “The Old Pond” is a kind of fairy tale. However, I was aware of the fact that it could be a weak idea for live-action because there was not much space for character development. It was, after all

a short film. Unless the story is about a character, it would be difficult to build a character through the story in such a short amount of time. The running time of five to seven minutes for a thesis films is normal. For “The Old Pond,” I always thought that more than thirty minutes would be necessary to build character relationships in order to tell the story fully.

I have been working on the story idea for some time. I made it for the storyboarding class with Prof. Duane Palyka in winter quarter 1999. The project was to come up with a story about a personal experience. I had a strange experience when I was twelve or so with my grand mother, so I decided to use it.

What really happened was that my grand mother and I were taking a walk near a small mountain where my father’s cottage was. One day just like in “The Old Pond,” we found a small pond we never saw before. The next day we went for a walk and to see the pond, but it was gone. I asked her what happened to the pond; she said that she did not even remember we saw the pond yesterday. I felt like I was bewitched or I mixed up with a dream, but for a proof, my younger brother claimed that he was there with us and witnessed the pond. I did not remember that until he mentioned it recently. I am bad with memories. However, it is an anecdote, not a story. I had to tweak it for the class project, and it turned out to be more of a fictional story.

Since then, the story was noticed by whoever came across, including Prof. Skip Battaglia who became my chair of my committee. Unfortunately Prof. Battaglia was scheduled to take a sabbatical for a year after May of 2002, so he had to pass the job to my new chair Prof. Adrienne Carageorge. It was simply my fault that I could not keep my promise to finish everything before he left.

Though I saved the idea of “The Old Pond” for the above-mentioned reasons for almost two years, I decided to give a try with some encouragement and recommendation from my classmates and professors.

The Development 1

The technique I was going to use was the combination of 2D character animation against 3D background. It would be a challenge and could produce an interesting look for the film. However, there has to be a specific reason why those two different mediums would be used. If the differences become too obvious, it could destroy the atmosphere of the film.

The story is about time, a place, and death. Characters are there to experience the death of their loved ones and the mystery of the pond. However their happy life was indicated through their relationships with grand children. Then they face their own death, but

without pain. The story was dedicated to my grandmother who passed away about ten years ago. She had cancer, and she suffered a long time till her death.

Realizing a realistic type of story in 3D animation is difficult. For instance, “Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within” (directed by Hironobu Sakaguchi and Motonori Sakakibara in 2001) is the first realistic 3D animation ever made, but it failed to create a real emotion through the 3D characters. As the visual gets closer to the real thing, the acting has to be more realistic. On the contrary, 2D animations let audiences assume that if it is an animation, it is OK that movements are a little unrealistic. If there is a drawn character, they instantly get the idea that it is an animation, but sometimes 3D animations get too close to real things. The audiences then forget that they are watching an animation. That is where they start to get frustrated by watching unrealistic movements. The story is more for the live-action piece, but I did not have enough confidence in myself to do it in 3D. The choice of using 2D character animation was made through my experiences in the past at school. I was never good at computer and especially 3D animation. My skill did not improve like I hoped. Therefore, there was no choice but doing in 2D (besides there was another reason - too many characters to handle in 3D) because drawing was something I could be sure of. The use of 3D background was planned to give a clear sign that nature in the film is significant and closer to real life. The 3D background was also necessary to make a “live-action-like” camera movement possible.

I presented the simple version of the story and its storyboard at the thesis committee meeting before I actually started to work on the project. As a matter of fact, it was the exact same one I made for the storyboarding class a year and half ago. There I received some interesting criticism of the story from a few professors. They thought that the grandson of the protagonist was too young to be left alone in the end of the film (I originally set his age up as around five years old.). Some audiences may feel that it is too cruel, and that would cause a sad but feel-good story to only feel bad. Prof. Battaglia disagreed with the comments, but the discussion left me something to think about for later.

Before I went back to Japan, I decided to write a short story based on “The Old Pond,” in order to understand and develop the characters. That helped me in some way, but on the other hand, I had to realize that the film might have to be longer than the originally planned length of ten to fifteen minutes. At the same time, Prof. Battaglia believed that seven minutes would be just right.

The Research

I went back to Japan in summer of 2001, and then I went to the place where I experienced the incident. The idea was to feel the atmosphere again before I started to work on the film. I took some pictures of the trees and bushes as a reference, but I could not

remember exactly where it happened anymore. I also went to a natural park with some ponds and took some pictures for a reference too. This later helped me a lot when I changed the idea of using 3D background to 2D background.

Based on these experiences, I started to work on the character-design and the storyboard while I was in Japan, and it was the first difficulty I faced on this project. The character design I used for the storyboarding class was fine. They resembled characters in some animated TV shows for children. However, I realized that there was a confusion of mixing an Asian style with western style in me. Doing cute and funny stuff could become closer to western style, as in Disney and Loony Toons, but of course there are same cute and funny stuff in Japan too, in their own way. The truth is that after living in the States for almost ten years, I began to ignore the Japanese culture, in order to live in this country and to blend in better. Eventually this caused me to forget my experience of making comics for several years in Japan and lose the passion for drawing I used to have.

I used to love animation and comics when I was in Japan. However when I came to the States, I was determined to study Art and painting instead, and I felt my roots were a kind of distraction. Therefore I abandoned them for good, I thought. However seven years later, I ended up coming to study computer animation at RIT. Although 3D animation is different from a traditional animation or Japanimation, there is some space to utilize my past creative experiences while growing up in Japan.

After learning 3D animation for two years, the decision to do my thesis on 2D animation instead of 3D was not easy decision to make. Nevertheless, in order to produce a quality film, you have to use the best of what you have at the moment. It was a drawing for me. After researching visual styles, the idea of mixing 2D and 3D animations seemed more and more promising. Although I could not come up with concrete character design and had no storyboard until I got back in US, I had confidence in the approach I decided on.

The Development 2 -Japanimation-

After coming back from Japan in August, I continued the character design and storyboarding, but there was not much progress. The problem was with the style I was searching for, not too simple but enough realism to show in a few lines. By then I regained my appreciation for 2D animations and even Japanimation.

In late 90's, Japanimation was booming in US. Underground Japanimation fans in US at first supported it. Then the animated feature called "Ghost In The Shell" (directed by Mamoru Oshii) came to US in 1998, and it was the beginning of a rise of Japanimation.

Another famous Japanese animation came to the US in 1999, called "Princess Mononoke," (made in Japan in 1997) directed by Hayao Miyazaki. Disney/ Miramax distributed this film. His latest film "Spirited Away" was nominated for the best animated feature film at the Academy Awards in 2002, and actually won. He is the most

famous animator in Japan now, and he was already well known all over Asia. He is, actually the person I used to admire.

Japanese animations have a tendency to tell serious stories. My film is also somewhat serious. I had heard some nice things about Japanese animation and Miyazaki's film from my classmates. I finally decided to follow whatever comes naturally from myself. This gave me a push, and the character designs and story development had begun to be realized in Fall of 2001.

The Development 3 - The Changes -

I spent 2-3 months on storyboarding. The numbers of index cards I used for drawing is over two hundred, and the number increased more and more as the course of the story changed. As a matter of fact, the story kept changing frequently later on. At first, it changed to be longer to give more details of the relationships between characters, and it stayed that way for a long time. However by the end of Spring 2002, because of the limitation of the time foreign students can stay (three years plus maximum of full one year after I-20 form gets renewed), I had to give up on the long version of the story and came up with the parallel stories version. This way the two stories (first one with younger version of the protagonist and his grand mother, and second one with older version of the protagonist and his grand son) could be told simultaneously. The younger version and the older version of the protagonist both are taking a walk and will find the pond. One will

witness the mystery of the disappearance of the pond, and another will get the answer just before he dies. These two stories are told through similar actions of how old person reacts when he or she sees the pond. For example, both grandma and the old version of the protagonist close their eyes before they witness who sits on the bench across the pond. Sometimes the similarities are shown in similar framing and a shot. This idea had also changed a little later on and became shuffled more than paralleled. Nevertheless it was helpful to take out unnecessary actions and to focus directly on what happened to the characters.

Unfortunately I had already modelled a playground where the older version of the protagonist takes a nap on the bench, and his grand son plays with his toy bird on a top of the jungle gym. I spent some time on the research of typical Japanese playground. By then I had some character animations for the opening sequence too. A lot of 2D character animations, which were based on the first storyboard, did not make into the final cut. These are just some examples of how and why I wasted my time and the completion of my film got delayed so much.

If this were a live-action piece, it would be normal that a lot of sequences do not make into the final cut. In animation, even simple movements take a lot more time and effort than in live-action. When it comes to an animation, a fully completed storyboard is essential. It was not a total waste of time because I needed some practice for 2D character

animations anyway. However 2D character animation was much harder than I imagined.

After spending some unproductive time, the changes in my story and the idea of using 3D background became inevitable.

It was a natural change, but it shifted to a different direction. Now that the playground sequence was out of picture, it did not seem a good idea to stick with using 3D for the background anymore. The Japanese mat room with a Buddhist alter was already half-made in 3D by then. Other small objects, such as a toy bird were also created in 3D.

However, knowing that painting trees by hand has less risk of standing out too much from the film, instead of using the paint effect of MAYA (actually, it never achieve the effect I was looking for.), the percentage of use of 3D became less and less. Originally my goal was to create a quality film by using the strengths of 2D and 3D animation tools, but now producing a quality film became my only goal. And yet it was a difficult task as a one-man project.

Working Process

As my direction changed it became more concrete. Making 2D not a 3D animation is clear, all I had to is work hard. There was not a single thing that I felt comfortable about doing. Nothing worked to my satisfaction. Many retakes had to be made. There was time

I thought I picked the wrong project, but it was too late to go back. But I realized I would feel exactly the same on any project I did.

A change of storyboard never stopped till the very end. The transition of present time to the past was the most important part of the film. Otherwise the only thing this film would create is confusion for the audiences. That the protagonist repeats the same or similar actions in the present and past makes it easy to show the transition of time but at the risk of being repetitive. One of the techniques I chose is to show a quick flashback before something happens, by using a picture of chrysanthemum. That is a common flower used for funerals in Japan. In addition, camera movements were used to show transition. For instance, a camera pans up one scene and continuously pans down in the next scene. The actions in the present and past were carefully chosen not to distract the flow of the story. Now that I have to paint all the backgrounds, there was not enough to do all the work by the time of screening. In order to save my time and efforts, I found a way to use photographs and changing its looks by using Photoshop and paint them over to make it look more hand painted. It was not as easy as it sounds because I had to paint all over the places to achieve the look I wanted. The average amount of time to paint one background was one day. Maya was also used to save time by attaching the finished painting on the plane surface and rotating it in the 3D space. It was still the same painting but by adding a different perspective, it looked slightly different.

After finishing the animations and paintings, the last thing I need to learn was how to composite them. I purchased a Japanese animation compositing software soon after the production started. It was supposed to be the easiest software for compositing. There was an article saying that it was actually handier than After Effects, which I learned in 2D Computer Animation class two years ago but never felt comfortable enough to use. I had to admit that I was wrong in the end. Using After Effects gave me more opportunity to create a better look to the film. Since there is no lighting for 2D animation, you have to create the illusion of light by painting. However, it was easy to add the lighting effects with the After Effects.

I blurred the character and the background in order to make them more blended in. With this technique, the depth of field was also created. The character and the backgrounds were occasionally moved in different speed to create the illusionary space between them. These are a few examples of what you can do for compositing with After Effects. The After Effects became the most important tool to create the look of my film.

The sound effects and music were the last thing to be added to the film. I had another opportunity to go back to Japan in the end of 2002. There I did most of the recording of dialogs and music. My youngest brother did the music for all of the films I produced at RIT, so naturally he became the composer of my thesis film too. He is a guitarist and normally creates his music with a guitar. However I had an idea of using the piano sound

for “The Old Pond” all the time. Thus, he had to practice playing piano for the film this time. As a result, he came up with the right music for the piece.

Since the music and sound effects emphasize its atmosphere and mood of the film, coming up with a right kind of music was crucial. Especially when the dialog does not attempt to tell the audience what the characters feel and think very much, the music helps to convey it. Originally I was planning to use a sound of guitar for Young man and a piano for Grandma to show their personality. The differences of two kinds of sounds were supposed to show clearly especially in the sequence of which they take a walk together until they find the old pond. However after deciding not to do the scene, I decided to focus more to find the right sound and the melody for each scene.

In addition, sound effects were critical for my film. Compared to my last two films, many sound effects were necessary for this one. Putting dialogs in the film was my first experience. Although the sound quality never reached my satisfaction with the equipment I had at the time, I learned the importance of sound effects in the course of the production. Every time some sounds or the music were added to the film, it became more and more alive. It is always an exciting moment of making a film.

A fine film can be told even without dialog or music, but unfortunately music and sound effects were necessary for my 2D animation because of the lack of character movements.

If I could have another chance to create a film, my next challenge would be to make a film that moves people even without sound.

Symbolism

Before I go to the conclusion, I would like to talk about the symbolism used for “The Old Pond.” All the filmmakers have their own way of telling their message to the audience. It may be told through the story itself or some symbols they used in the film. The symbols I used were mainly to support the theme of the story. The audiences’ interpretation varies. As long as the main message is passed to the audience, the symbols used maybe understood differently. Therefore there is no symbol that the audience has to understand when they watch this film.

As a matter of fact, the symbols in this film are very simple. For example, water at the pond means “life.” It should be the universal one because we all know it is where life comes from. A character who sits on the bench wears white shirts or something close to white color, and the bench is white too. The color of white is “purity” like an angel. A white bird flies across the pond, and the toy bird, which the grandson plays with, are the “guide” to the pond. The stone stands in the pond is not actually a symbol but reminds of a tombstone. Especially the shape of the stone appears after the water vanished from the

pond looks similar to the Japanese style tombstone. It tells that the place is somehow related with the death. A chrysanthemum also implies death.

As you can see, life and death coexist at the old pond. The hint of the story was taken from my own experience with my grandmother. However the setting of the place seemed perfect for the story, and it makes me think as though I was destined to create this story.

Conclusion

The message of this film is about the importance of caring your family. Although it is about the memory and the place where the mystery happened, at the same time, it is about how the character might live outside the screen. The Old man and Grandma had their grandchildren who cared about them. They lived happy lives by maintaining a nice family, which can be simple but difficult to keep it that way. Witnessing the “Old Pond” may be the reward for them. The ones who saw it when they were young were destined to build a nice family.

Dying without pain was something I wished for my grandmother. I then passed my wish to those who seek a normal happiness in life and deserve to end his or her life painlessly. I hope this film leaves the viewer something nice and warm in their heart and make them realize how life should be.

Appendix A:

Thesis Proposal

Proposal for an MFA Thesis Project

A Good Day

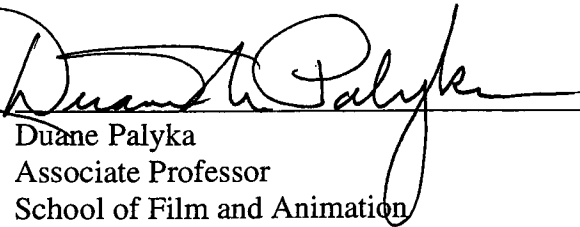
BY

Takeshi Takamoto

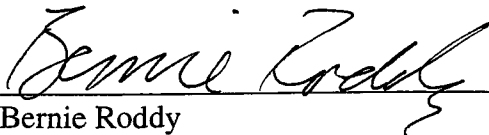
MFA Imaging Arts/ Computer Animation
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ROCHESTER, NEW YORK
April, 2001



Skip Battaglia, Chair
Professor
School of Film and Animation



Duane Palyka
Associate Professor
School of Film and Animation



Bernie Roddy
Adjunct Professor
School of School of Film and Animation

Timeline

2001

Summer Break

- Research/ Pre-production
- Designing Characters/ Setting
- Live-action reference shooting
- Collecting sound samples

September

- Modeling settings in 3D
- 2D Pencil test

October

- Modeling settings in 3D
- 2D Pencil test

November

- 2D pencil test
- 2D character animation
- Composition test of 2D and 3D

December

- 2D pencil test
- 2D character animation
- Composition test of 2D and 3D

2002

January

- 2D character animation
- 3D animation
- Compositing 2D and 3D

February

- 2D character animation
- 3D animation
- Compositing 2D and 3D

March

- 2D character animation
- 3D animation
- Compositing 2D and 3D

April

- 2D character animation
- 3D animation
- Compositing 2D and 3D
- Editing

May

- Editing
- Sounds
- Duplicating

Research and Thesis credits

- 12 credits will be divided as follow: 1 credit for 2001 Summer quarter, 3 credits for 2002 Fall quarter, and 4 credits each for 2002 Winter and Spring quarters.

Thesis Screening

- Together with Spring Screening

Budget

	Estimate	In Kind	Actual
Research	\$400	\$400	\$0
Script	\$1,200	\$1,200	\$0
Storyboard	\$1,200	\$1,200	\$0
Animatic	\$1,200	\$1,200	\$0
3D Character Design	\$8,000	\$8,000	\$0
3D Character Animation	\$20,000	\$20,000	\$0
3D Background Modeling	\$8,000	\$8,000	\$0
Lighting and Texture	\$8,000	\$8,000	\$0
Rendering	\$4,000	\$4,000	\$0
Soundtrack Composition	\$500	\$500	\$0
Soundtrack Recording	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$0
Musicians	\$500	\$500	\$0
Hardware	\$8,000	\$8,000	\$0
Software	\$3,200	\$3,200	\$0
Orb Drive	\$320	\$320	\$0
Orb Disc	\$160	\$0	\$160
Video Tapes	\$100	\$0	\$100
CD-R	\$30	\$0	\$30
Total	\$65,810	\$65,520	\$290

Marketing Plan

SIGGRAPH
SAFO Student Animation Festival of Ottawa
Ottawa International Festival
Hiroshima International Festival
New York Animation Festival
Vancouver Effects & Animation Festival
Art in Motion
Student Academy Awards
Asifa-East
Movies on a Shoestring

Takeshi Takamoto
Treatment for thesis

Title: A Good Day (working title)

A young man and his grandmother are taking a walk in the park and find a small pond in the woods. There is a young lady sitting on the white bench on the other side of the pond. She waves at his grandmother, and his grandmother waves back at her as if she knows the young lady.

His grandmother, then turns around and starts walking back to where she came from. He finds that the young lady has disappeared during the short time when he was looking at his grandmother leaving. He gets bewildered. Soon the grandmother collapses and lies down on the grass field. As the young man runs to his grandmother and holds her in his arms, the scene fades out into black gradually.

The young man is in black suits and a black tie and holding a framed picture of his grandmother and crying quietly. We see some people in a black suit and dresses walking in front of him at the funeral.

He is now looking through the photo album in the living room. They are the photos of good life that his grandmother lived. He suddenly stops flipping the page. He is stunned by finding a photo of the young lady who he saw at the pond. He then quickly turns and looks at the framed photo of his grandmother in the Buddhist altar. It looks like that she is smiling at him shyly.

He runs back to the pond. However there is no sign of that the pond existed there anymore. There is just a grass field. He keeps standing open-mouthed but no words come out from there. As we see the close-up of his face, it transforms into the old man's.

He is now an old man, and he and his grandson, who is just a little boy are taking a walk in the same park he once walked with his grandmother. He stops suddenly when he catches the reflected lights coming from the woods. He becomes shocked to find that pond again. Excited and confused, he runs into the woods.

There is the same pond he witnessed a long time ago in front of him. His grandson catches up to him soon and looks up to his grandfather in confusion. The old man is looking at the young man sitting on the white bench on the other

side of the pond. The young man is discovered, in a repetition of the style from the beginning of this film, as actually the old man himself. He looks just like when he first arrived here. The young version of him waves at him. After a few seconds of confusion, the old man closes his eyes and smiles, as if he has understood what is going to happen to him next. He waves back at the young man. The scene fades into white as it overlaps with the reflected lights of the water surface.

END

Technique: Combination of 2D characters and 3D background

Sound: Mainly the sound of water in the background with other quiet nature sounds

Appendix B:

Original Storyboard

Selected Sequence From The Original Storyboard

1



4



2



5



3



6



7



10



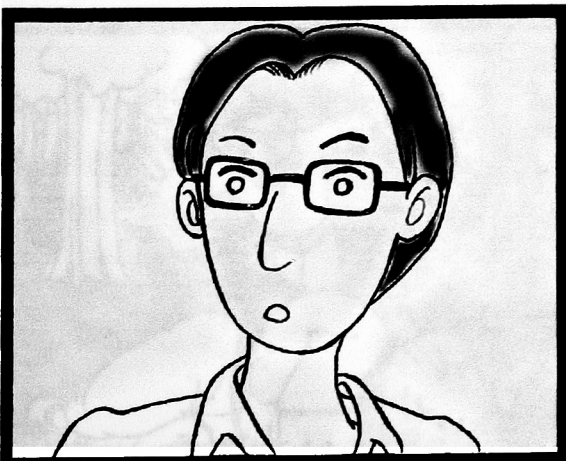
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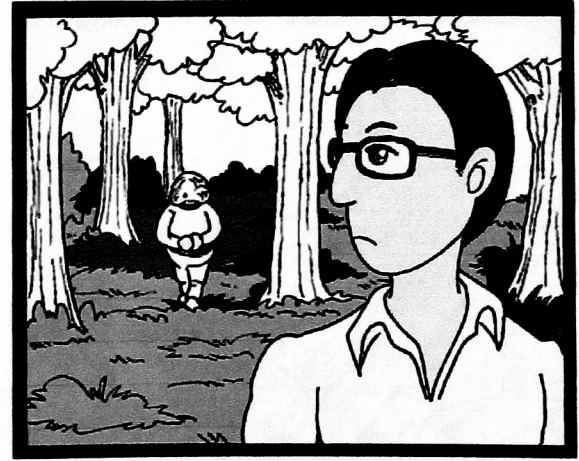
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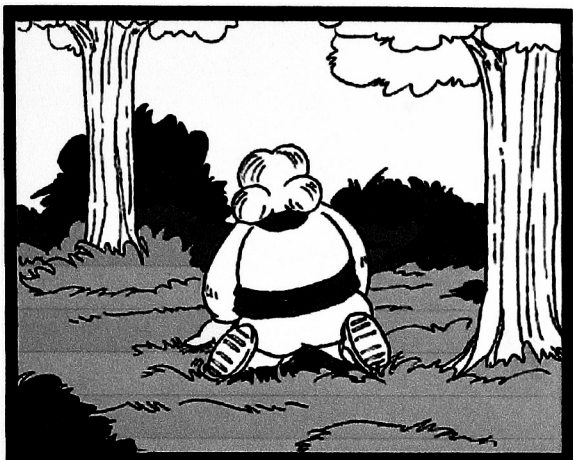
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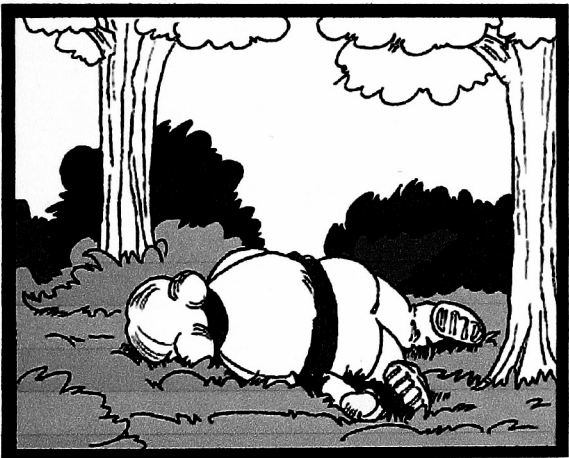
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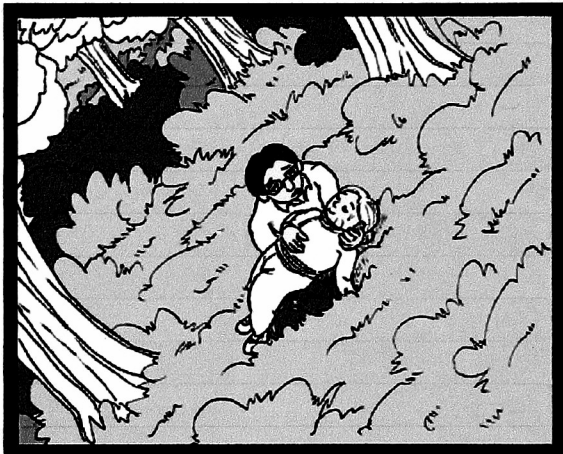
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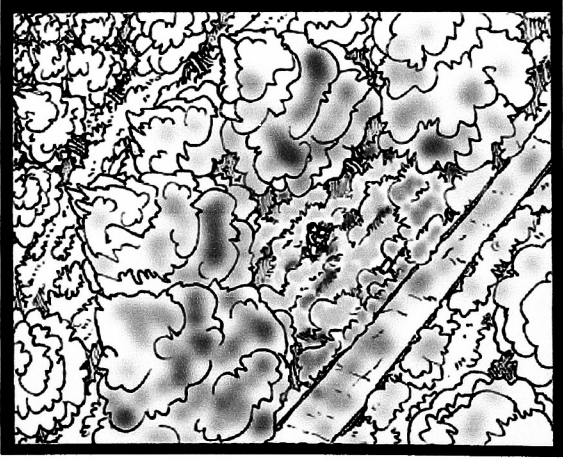
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15



18



Appendix C:

New Storyboard

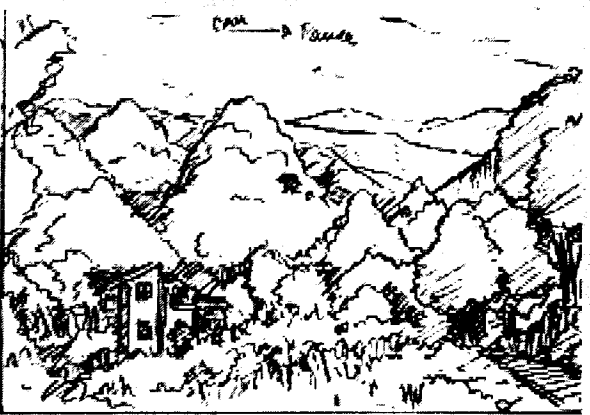
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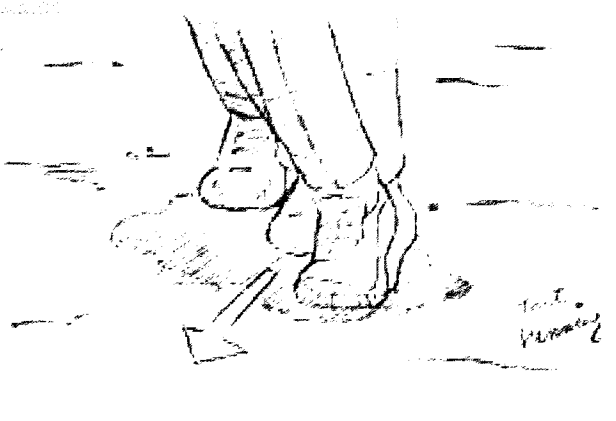


(Fade in)



Selected Sequence
From
New Storyboard







Appendix D:

Color Stills

